

WISHING A NEW ONE ON SHORTY

Drawings by F. Vaux Wilson

By SEWELL FORD

DO things just happen, like peculiar changes in the weather, or is there a general scheme on file somewhere? Is it a free-for-all we're mixed up in—with our Harry Thaws and our Helen Kellers; our white slavers, our white hopes, and our white plague campaigns; our trunk murders, and our fire heroes? Or are we runnin' on schedule and headed somewhere?

I ain't givin' you the answer in the back of the book. I ain't turned over that far. I'm just slippin' you the proposition, with the side remark that now and then, when the jumble seems worse than ever, you can get a glimpse of what might be a clue, or might not.

Anyway, here I was, busy as a little bee, blockin' right hooks and body jabs that was bein' shot at me by a husky young uptown minister who's a headliner at his job, I understand, but who's developin' a good, useful punch on the side. I was just landin' a cross wallop to the ribs, by way of keepin' him from bein' too ambitious with his left, when out of the tail of my eye I notices Swifty Joe edgin' in with a card in his paw.

"Time out!" says I, steppin' back and droppin' my guard. "Well, Swifty, what's the scandal?"

"Gent waitin' to see you," says he.

"Let him wait, then," says I.

"Ah-r-r-r, but he's a reg'lar gent!" protests Swifty, fingerin' the card.

"Even so, he'll keep five minutes more, won't he?" says I.

"But he—he's—" begins Swifty, strugglin' to connect that mighty intellect of his with his tongue.

"Ah, read off the name," says I. "Is it Mayor Mitchel, Doc Wilson, or who?"

"It says J. B-a-y-a-r-d Ste—Steele," says Swifty.

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'. "Lemme see. Him! Say, Swifty, you go back and tell J. Bayard that if he's got nerve enough to want to see me, it'll be a case of wait. And if he's at all messy about it, I give you leave to roll him downstairs. The front of some folks! Come on now, Dominie! Cover up better with that right mitt: I'm goin' to push in a few on you this time."

And if you never saw a Fifth avenue preacher well lathered up you should have had a glimpse of this one at the end of the next round. He's game, though; even thanks me for it puffy.

"You're welcome," says I. "Maybe I did steam 'em in a bit; but I expect it was because I had my mind on that party out front. While you're rubbin' down I'll step in and attend to his case. If I could only wish a pair of eight-ounce gloves on him for a few minutes!"

SO, without stoppin' to change, or even sheddin' the mitts, I walks into the front office, to discover this elegant party in the stream-line cutaway pacin' restless up and down the room. Yes, he sure is some imposin' to look at, with his pearl gray spats, and the red necktie blazin' brilliant under the close-clipped crop of Grand Duke whiskers. I don't know what there is special about a set of frosted face shrubb'ry that sort of suggests bank presidents and so on, but somehow they do. Them and the long, thin nose gives him a pluty, distinguished look, in spite of the shifty eyes and the weak mouth lines. But I ain't in a mood to be impressed.

"Well?" says I snappy.

I expect my appearin' in a cut-out jersey, with my shoulder muscles still bunched, must have jarred him a little; for he lifts his eyebrows doubtful and asks, "Er—Professor McCabe, is it?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "What'll it be?"

"My name," says he, "is Steele."

"I know," says I. "Snug fit too, I judge."

He flushes quick and stiffens. "Do you mean to infer, Sir, that—"

"You're on," says I. "The minute I heard your name I placed you for the smooth party that tried to unload a lot of that phony Radio stock on Mrs. Benny Sherwood. Wanted to euchre her out of the twenty thousand life insurance she got when Benny took the booze count last winter, eh? Well, it happens she's a friend of Mrs. McCabe, and it was through me your little scheme was blocked. Now I guess we ought to be real well acquainted."

But I might have known such crude stuff wouldn't get under the hide of a polished article like J. Bayard. He only shrugs his shoulders and smiles sarcastic.

"The pleasure seems to be all mine," says he. "But as you choose. Who am I to contend with the defender of the widow and the orphan that between issuing a

stock and trading in it there is a slight difference? However deeply I am distressed by your private opinion of me, I shall try to—"

"Ah, ditch the sarcasm," says I, "and spring your game! What is it this trip, a wire-tappin' scheme, or just plain green goods?"

"You flatter me," says J. Bayard. "No, my business of the moment is not to appropriate any of the princely profits of your—er—honest toil," and he stops for another of them acetic-acid smiles.

"Yes," says I, "it is a batty way of gettin' money—workin' for it, eh? But go on. Whatcher mean you lost your dog?"

"I—er—I beg pardon?" says he.

"Ah, get down to brass tacks!" says I. "You ain't payin' a society call, I take it?"

HE gets that. And what do you guess comes next?

Well, he hands over a note. It's from a lawyer's office, askin' him to call at two P. M. that day to meet with me, as it reads, "and discuss a matter of mutual interest and advantage." It's signed "R. K. Judson, Attorney."

"Well, couldn't you wait?" says I. "It's only eleven-thirty now, you know."

"It is merely a question," says Steele, "of whether or not I shall go at all."

"So you hunt me up to do a little private sleuthin' first, eh?" says I.

"It is only natural," says he. "I don't know this Mr.—er—Judson, or what he wants of me."

"No more do I," says I. "And the notice I got didn't mention you at all; so you have that much edge on me."

"And you are going?" says he.

"I'll take a chance, sure," says I. "Maybe I'll button my pockets a little tighter, and tuck my watchfob out of sight; but no lawyer can throw a scare into me just by askin' me to call. Besides, it says 'mutual interest and advantage,' don't it?"

"H-m-m-m!" says Mr. Steele, after gazin' at the note thoughtful. "So it does. But lawyers have a way of—" Here he breaks off sudden and asks, "You say you never heard of this Mr. Judson before?"

"That's where you fool yourself," says I. "I said I didn't know him; but if it'll relieve your mind any, I've heard him mentioned. He used to handle Pyramid Gordon's private affairs."

"Ah! Gordon!" says

Steele, his shifty eyes narrowin'. "Yes, yes! Died abroad a month or so ago, didn't he?"

"In Rome," says I.

"The rheumatism got to his heart. He could see it comin' to him before he left. Poor old Pyramid!"

"Indeed?" says Steele. "And was Gordon—er—a friend of yours, may I ask?"

"One of my best," says I. "Know him, did you?"

Mr. Steele darts a quick glance at me. "Rather!" says he.

"Then there can't be so much myst'ry about this note, then," says I. "Maybe he's willed us a trinket or so. Friend of yours too, I expect?"

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matter," says he. "It began in Chicago, back in the good old days when trade was unhampered by fool administrations. At the time, if I may mention the fact, I had some little prominence as a pool organizer. We were trying to corner July wheat,—getting along very nicely too,—when your friend Gordon got in our way. He had managed to secure control of a dinky grain-carrying railroad and a few elevators. On the strength of that he demanded that we let him in. So we were forced to take measures to—er—eliminate him."

"And Pyramid wouldn't be eliminated, eh?" says I.

J. Bayard shrugs his shoulders careless and spreads out his hands. "Gordon luck!" says he. "Of course we were unprepared for such methods as he employed against us. Up to that time no one had thought of stealing an advance copy of the government crop report and using it to break the market. However, it worked. Our corner went to smash. I was cleaned out. You might have thought that would have satisfied most men; but not Pyramid Gordon! Why, he even pushed things so far as to sell out my office furniture, and bought the brass signs, with my name on them, to hang in his own office, as a Sioux Indian displays a scalp, or a Mindanao head hunter ornaments his gatepost with his enemy's skull. That was the beginning; and while my opportunities for paying off the score have been somewhat limited, I trust I have neglected none. And now—well, I can't possibly see why the closing up of his affairs should interest me at all. Can you?"

"Say, you don't think I'm doin' any volunteer frettin' on your account, do you?" says I.

"I quite understand," says he. "But about seeing this lawyer—do you advise me to go?"

He's squintin' at me foxy out of them shifty eyes of his, cagy and suspicious, like we was playin' some kind of a game. You know the sort of party J. Bayard is—if you don't, you're lucky. So what's the use wastin' breath? I steps over and opens the front office door.

"Don't chance it," says I. "I wouldn't have anything happen to you for the world. I'll tell Judson I've come alone, to talk for the dictograph and stand on the trapdoor. And as you go down the stairs there better walk close to the wall."

J. Bayard, still smilin', takes the hint. "Oh, I may turn up, after all," says he as he leaves.

"Huh!" says I, indicatin' deep scorn.

But if I'd been curious before about this invite to



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